

LOTS OF TALK, NOT ENOUGH ACTION?

MAKING GENDER EQUITY A REALITY



FOLLOW THE GENERAL



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GENERAL
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THIS PHRASE permeates society and often remains a thorn in the flesh where action is never a reality or is repeatedly delayed. I am certain that those who fight against world poverty, those who wage a war against violence towards women or those who know the oppression of racism (and the list could go on...) would all say: 'For far too long, we have talked about it, it's time for action!'

When we began our recent dialogue around gender equity in The Salvation Army, international leaders identified officers as a target for change in relation to this subject. Many concluded it's just more talk, nothing ever changes. To my great dismay, I as General had to accept that criticism and do so on behalf of those who have gone before me, despite honourable efforts made to address this issue. Very little in our current statistics reflects an affirmative change that gives evidence of any significant cultural shift – not enough action!

What's different now?

As a lead-up to the High Council 2018, agreed agenda items were presented and left for implementation by whomever would become the 21st General. I had no difficulty in accepting, affirming and actioning these agenda items, with one being gender equity. The growing concern of our current reality is that the world sees us as treating gender equitably: we speak of a history and theology that convey our beliefs are clear, but our actions do not reflect appropriate behaviour as, for example, there are few women in positions of executive leadership. They are often not at the table when setting policy, strategy and direction. (Note: I think all women officers are leaders and people of influence, but not often in executive or senior reserved appointments.)

In the 'What's different now?' category, let me share what I believe are significant developments. These have come about due to the attention being given to the agenda of gender equity!

1. Our reliance on theology needed serious attention. At my request, the International Theological Council supported Colonel Wendy Swan in the creation of a document articulating a current theological context. We recently began our International Leaders Virtual Conversations with this helpful work and, most importantly, it is providing beneficial and challenging dialogue. Of note are affirmations which, when agreed, will be embedded and culturalised into our various processes that presently struggle to reflect equity, creating an excellent outcome. Soon we will share further and more transparently.

2. The Gender Equity Task Force, led by Commissioners Mark Tillsley and Lisbeth Welander, has guided international dialogue, created frontline input through survey and engagement, while playing a role in

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presenting to our international leaders. While I write, I am reading pages and pages of comments that suggest to me that we are ready to move beyond the talking and engage in action. Again, we need to finish this part of the journey and share outcomes with you.

3. There are no credible obstacles to prevent us from moving forward. Our collective will on this important matter needs to confront our failure and dismiss current excuses and personal bias – for the sake of a ‘fit-for-purpose’ Army. We begin now to create individual paths marked by equity that will reflect a different reality ASAP.

Please understand that as General I carry a unique leadership privilege as I am directly responsible for appointing territorial and command leaders to give local oversight of our global Army. I also sign off on numerous senior leadership appointments proposed by these territories and commands. I sense that my accountability in these matters is important in establishing a new era that is less centralised and more attentive to individual gifting. In this regard, two things are important:

- For more than a year the role of the International Appointments Board has been enhanced and only in exceptional circumstances does the General make a decision without consultation. Our planning is long-term (three to five years out), strategic and begins with a ‘best-leader’ approach.
- Every territory and command is being asked to partner with IHQ in succession planning, developing a pipeline of leaders who, over time, can equally be considered for leadership positions at every level of the movement. This requires local leadership to initiate appropriate personnel strategies with the goal of developing all leaders under their care.

I am committed to a future of equity because it is the moral, ethical, just and biblical thing to do. It is also significant that I expect present and future leaders to join me as champions of gender equity within our officer ranks.

I wrote earlier that there are no obstacles we can’t overcome and I still believe that to be true. However,

there are challenges and what some consider as systemic issues within the Army. Let me refer to a few...

- We must level the playing field when it comes to equal opportunities. (No longer can this Army be a man’s army.)

- We must begin early, right from officer training to subsequent appointments. It will mean taking the Founder’s words seriously – ‘anyone can advance to any rank’ (paraphrased).

- We must affirm each other. I refer particularly to married couples who share the precious covenant of officership. We need more than a few good examples of husbands and wives sorting this out and offering the best of themselves. (I may be speaking directly to husband colleagues in this comment.)

- There are culture frameworks that have become rigid Army culture while society has moved on. There are biblical texts being used inappropriately. There are personal views that are inconsistent with scriptural teaching. All of these need to be surrendered.

More thoughts flow as I write, but enough talk, let’s take action. If we have it wrong, and in many respects we do, let’s make it right!

The injustices of gender inequity have been painful and difficult for too many of our officers. Let us lament and forgive each other! If there are systemic processes that still perpetrate the same outcomes (and there are!), let’s stop them!

I believe this is God’s Army – not mine, not yours! The closer it reflects his nature, his character and his teaching, the more his rich blessing will be poured out on us. I believe we are in the middle of understanding our stewardship responsibility for his Army. As I carry a portion of that, I call upon leaders and each colleague officer to do what is right in God’s eyes and, ultimately, bring honour and glory to him.

Enough talk – let’s do it!